

TOUGH TIMES

for seabirds



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As the world watches with mounting concern the ecological disaster resulting from the ongoing oil gush in the Gulf of Mexico, South Africa marks the 10-year anniversary of the wreck of the *Treasure* about 20 kilometres north of Table Bay, Cape Town, in June 2000, when almost 20 000 African Penguins were oiled. A similar number of unaffected birds were captured at Dassen and Robben islands and then released from Port Elizabeth beaches, more than 800 kilometres away.

The translocation was a great success. Thanks to the then Avian Demography Unit's website the public was able to track the progress of the penguins as they swam back to the Western Cape, arriving after the bulk of the oil had dispersed. Meanwhile, a huge operation

was set up near the Cape Town city centre to clean and rehabilitate the oiled birds. Thousands of volunteers experienced the joy of bitten fingers as they scrubbed and fed the unfortunate creatures. There was a great sense of community as we met this crisis and penguins became the main topic of conversation around town.

Fast forward 10 years and African Penguins are again in crisis. The cause is less obvious, but the impact is no less serious. Penguin numbers have fallen dramatically over the past decade, resulting in the species' status being changed from Vulnerable to Endangered. In this issue, Ross Wanless highlights their plight. It is clear that many factors impact the penguins, but most evidence indicates that a shortage of food is the primary concern. Fisheries scientists disagree with the pelagic fishing industry, which competes with penguins for sardines and anchovies. The industry maintains that there are plenty of fish – but it is not prepared to stop fishing close to penguin colonies. And while the two sides argue, penguin numbers dwindle. But competition with fisheries is not confined to African Penguins: Ian Michler reports how a burgeoning fishery now threatens a range of Southern Ocean predators that depend on Antarctic krill. These shrimp-like creatures are already at risk as a result of the decrease in sea ice linked to climate change; unbridled fishing for krill may push the population over the edge, fundamentally altering the functioning of the Southern Ocean ecosystem.

On a brighter note, Luc Hosten paid a visit to the newly refurbished SAMREC seabird rehabilitation facility in the Eastern Cape. Thanks to the major infrastructural developments in Nelson Mandela Bay, it seems inevitable that the region will face a potentially catastrophic oil spill at some

stage. It is encouraging to know that the region will have at least the kernel of expertise to handle such a crisis, especially given the increasing importance of the Eastern Cape's penguin colonies.

And what of the Gulf oil spill? Already it has affected some seabirds in the area, and oil coming ashore threatens at least 10 Important Bird Areas along the US coast. The long-term prognosis for birds in the region is bleak as the entire food web is adversely involved. And seabirds and waterbirds may not be the only species afflicted. Land birds migrating north over the Gulf shortly after the disaster occurred may have been harmed by smoke from spilled oil being burnt off. Will it influence any African birds? As long as the oil remains within the Gulf, it shouldn't endanger any of our seabirds or shorebirds. Shearwaters migrating north passed east of the area polluted by the spill. We can only hope that the crisis is resolved without further delays, and that the oil doesn't spread even more widely. The only silver lining is that perhaps this disaster will stimulate a critical rethink of the way we continue to squander fossil-fuel reserves.

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